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with suspense and
Southern charm."
—ELLERY ADAMS

Scrapbook of the Dead

A
Cumberland Creek
Mystery

Mollie Cox Bryan
Agatha Award Nominee for best first novel

Scrapbook of the Dead

Mollie Cox Bryan



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*Dedicated to my mom Sandy Cox,
who inspired my love of words, reading, and writing,
with much love.*

Chapter 1

She hadn't shown up for work a few days in a row. Had she been in the sub-zero room that whole time, slowly freezing to death?

"With these immigrants, you just never know," Pamela said. "They are hard workers, but sometimes things go wrong." She wrung her hands, which were white with tension.

"What do you mean by that?" The sheriff placed his hands on his hips, as camera flashes went off. Crime scene technicians buzzed around the room.

Annie stood with her arm wrapped around Randy, who was trembling—but her recorder pointed toward the sheriff and Pamela, owner of Pamela's Pie Palace, where the body of a young woman had just been found.

"I mean sometimes they just take off, disappear. Who knows where they go or why? Just last week, one of them disappeared, never showed up for work, and I couldn't reach her," Pamela said, her voice quivering.

Randy had discovered the frozen body early this

morning. He'd called the police, then Pamela, then Annie. After that, he began to fall apart. When Annie first walked in, she had barely recognized him because he was so pale.

"Maybe they go back home? Maybe they find another job?" Pamela flung her arms out.

Annie wished she could make an educated guess—but she didn't know many of the local foreign population. Foreign to Cumberland Creek, anyway. In fact, she was surprised to hear there even *was* an immigrant population in the small town.

"She was legal, right?" the sheriff asked, leaning in toward Pamela, but Annie heard every word. A big man, Sheriff Ted Bixby sported a twisty mustache that looked like it belonged on a Spanish conquistador, not a sheriff from a small county in Virginia.

"Absolutely," Pamela replied, her jaw stiff.

Nobody should look this good at five AM, not even Pamela, Queen of Pie, wife of the wealthy Evan Kraft. She always looked like she'd stepped right out of the pages of a 1950s pinup calendar. Curvy did not begin to describe her figure. And she was not afraid to show it off.

"I need to see the victim's papers," Sheriff Bixby said more to his deputy than to Pamela. "In fact, I need to see all of them. All the papers for every damn one of them."

Annie didn't like his tone when he said the word "them." But she'd gotten used to the "white men of a certain age" attitude about some things—like foreigners. In this part of Virginia, they seemed to be ignored, treated with suspicion, or made fun of. She had bitten her tongue so many times she counted herself lucky that it didn't have a huge gash.

The sheriff faced Annie and Randy, who'd already answered a barrage of questions. "Get some rest, son." Bixby looked at him with warmth and sympathy. He was a man who knew that discovering the frozen body of a coworker in a freezer was a jolt to the system. A man with deep family roots in that part of Virginia, he had seemingly been sheriff forever.

Annie knew that Detective Adam Bryant of Cumberland Creek's police force did not care for the man. She remembered a conversation she and Bryant had had about Sheriff Bixby during one of the other cases she had covered as a freelance reporter. But this most recent crime had taken place outside of Bryant's jurisdiction, so he hadn't been called in. She thanked the universe for that. On this, her last story, she didn't want to deal with his attitude.

"Coming through," yelled someone from inside the freezer.

The body of the small, dark-haired woman came through the doorway on a gurney. One thin line of red marred her neck where her throat had been neatly slit, and a big gash glistened over the artery where she had probably bled out. A craft knife was still lodged there. Pink and white polka-dotted tape covered her mouth, left in place for the autopsy.

So neatly done. Where was all the blood?

She had taken a good look at the scene earlier, but the light shone brighter outside the metallic, dimly lit walk-in freezer and she could see the young woman in detail. "How old did you say she was?" Annie asked Pamela.

"Her papers say she's twenty-three," Pamela replied with a tone leading Annie to believe that Pamela

didn't believe it. The young Mexican woman looked like she was sixteen, at most.

Why would Pamela hire her if she were suspicious about her age? Annie felt the ping of intuition pulling at her. Something about this was off. Way off. She needed to talk with Randy after he calmed down, then Pamela and the rest of the restaurant staff. It might be an even bigger story than a murder at the local, much beloved, Pamela's Pie Palace.

An older, dark haired woman sobbed and a young, wet-eyed man slipped his arms around her.

Friends? Annie made a mental note to speak with them.

"Shhh, Irina," the man said.

Irina, what a beautiful name, Annie thought amidst the chaos.

One of the technicians held a baggie with some colored paper and a photo inside.

"What's that?" Annie asked.

The young woman smiled politely. "Evidence." She held it up higher.

"Really? A scrapbook page?" Randy flung his hands up in the air. "I'm going back to the B and B. I need a drink and bed." Never mind that it was only five AM.

Since moving back to Cumberland Creek, he had taken a room at the new bed and breakfast in town until he found a house to purchase.

A loud commotion erupted from around the corner.

"Randy!"

Paige and Earl, Randy's parents, rushed in.

“Oh thank God you’re okay. Your daddy heard about an incident on the scanner. We were so worried.”

“What happened?” Earl asked.

Randy opened his mouth, but no words came out. His face grew even paler.

“Listen, Paige, why don’t you take Randy home? I don’t think he should be driving,” Annie said.

“That’s right,” the sheriff chimed in. “At least someone around here has a good head on their shoulders.” He gave Annie an approving glance.

“Sheriff.” Earl nodded, the appropriate manly greeting in the region. Not “hello.” Not “hi there.” Just a name and a nod. “My boy in trouble?”

“Oh no, no,” Sheriff Bixby said. “I’ll let him do the explaining on the way home.” He started to walk away.

“Now, Sheriff,” Pamela called to him. “I can’t let you leave without a couple pies. You said we’ll have to close today and I have all this pie that needs to go. Please grab one or two.”

The sheriff looked liked he knew his way around pie. “Why, thank you.”

Pamela had several pies already boxed up. A young man with dark skin and sullen, almost black eyes stood next to her, helping tie the boxes shut. He was the same man Annie had spotted a few moments ago holding the older woman, Irina.

Where is Irina, now? Annie eyes searched the room to no avail. The woman was gone.

“That coconut cream?” Sheriff Bixby asked, mulling over the boxes.

“It’s actually pumpkin cream, a fall special,” Pamela said.

Annie surveyed the scene. The sheriff and a few others gathered around the counter where Pamela doled out her treats.

“I’d just have to throw it away,” she said. “You all may as well take some.”

Annie turned and looked out the window at the dead body of the young woman being slid into the back of the ambulance. She glanced back at Pamela handing out boxes of pie and the sad-looking young man next to her. It had to be the oddest crime scene she’d ever witnessed.

“Annie?” Pamela said. “Do you want some pie? I have the cherry that you like so much. I also have some of my special mincemeat.”

Annie knew the special mincemeat was only available for two weeks during the fall. It was one of her favorites—a delicious mix of hard-to-find local seasonal ingredients, the kind that was barely legal.

Pamela always remembered everyone’s favorites.

Annie’s stomach tightened. “Thanks but not today. I just couldn’t.”

“Well now, young lady, are you a little queasy?” the sheriff said with a patronizing tone.

Why, yes, I think I am. I just saw a frozen person with her throat slit being carried out of here on a gurney. But, on second thought, she took a deep breath. “Never mind,” she said, ignoring the sheriff and speaking just to Pamela. “I’ll take whatever you’ve got there.”

The sheriff turned with his boxes of pie and started to walk out of the Pie Palace.

“Sheriff,” Annie called out as she followed him. “Might I have a word?”

He turned to look at her just as he started to open

the front door of the restaurant. His tan uniform stood out against the black and white tile floor and red booths.

She found the place kitschy and cute, but for some reason, this morning all the cuteness looked menacing. Murder amid the kitschiness. She didn't like it.

"What can I help you with, Ms. Chamovitz?" he asked, smiling.

Oh, this is different. Very different, indeed. A smiling law official. No Adam Bryant with his sideways, smirking grins. "What do you think happened here?"

"I don't speculate," the sheriff said. "Call my office later today. We might know something then. But it being Saturday, you never know."

"A walk-in freezer is an odd place for murder," Annie said, watching him tense.

"Well, now, who said anything about murder? It could have been an accident or suicide. As I say, Ms. Chamovitz, I don't speculate. I deal with facts."

An accidental throat slashing? Let him think I'm that gullible. "I'll call you later, then," she said, noticing the medical examiner getting ready to leave. She wanted to catch her before she left. Annie extended her hand to the sheriff. "Later, Sheriff Bixby."

He could not take her hand—his arms were full of pie boxes—but he nodded back at her, turned, and left the building.

"Ms. Jones?" Annie said as she walked over to the ME.

Ruth Jones looked up at her. She was an older, studious woman who had run into Annie frequently

around town. “Yes?” Ruth dug her car keys out of a jacket pocket.

“What can you tell me about the body? About the death?”

“Not much at this point,” Ruth said. “It looks like she bled to death. But I need to run some tests, of course, to be certain.”

“How would someone get trapped in a freezer long enough to bleed or freeze to death?” Annie asked.

Ruth walked out of the Pie Palace carrying a big bulky bag and a pie box. Annie followed her outside into the fall morning. The sun was just beginning to rise, giving the sky a slate blue tinge. The waning moon was still visible.

“Why didn’t she just open the door?” Annie wondered. “If she was in there struggling with someone who slit her throat?”

“No, she wasn’t inside with someone. I don’t think so, anyway. Not like what you’re suggesting. There were about five hundred pounds of sugar blocking the door. She couldn’t have possibly moved it. I’m sure she’s less than a hundred pounds.”

“But that means someone else placed the sugar in front of the door while she was in there.”

“She was probably already dead when they did. But restaurants get deliveries all times of the day and night. Check with Pamela on that,” Ruth said, opening her car door. “Call me later. I may have some answers for you then.”

“Okay,” Annie said and stepped back from the car. She had enough to file her first story on the case. But she’d need more for the complete story. A lot more.

She mentally sorted through the evidence and possibilities. She didn't know which was worse—the fact the young woman could have met her death in the freezer, crawling inside to get away from someone or that someone had killed her and then stored her dead body inside.

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